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ABSTRACT

A research project identified the challenges and benefits of collaborative research between extension agents and researchers. Its methodology was a critical review of the collaborative research approach used in a case study examining the usefulness of social capital in promoting rural landscape sustainability in two counties in the Hudson River Valley, New York. There were several challenges to the collaboration that related directly to the dialogical process. The tension and productivity of the dialogue between research and extension partners were illustrated by these challenges: ensuring that collaboration would be useful to both parties so that both would participate; language; time; focus; and political costs. The project illustrated the value of research/extension collaborations. Although important challenges of perspective, communication, power, and divergent professional needs had to be overcome, the benefits of such collaborative research were dramatic. The project not only demonstrated the relevance of social capital theory to extension practice but also used insights from practice to further elaborate social capital theory. By bringing community development practitioners into collaboration with university-based researchers, each gained something of the perspective of the other. (Contains 20 references.) (YLB)

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Collaborative Research Between Community Development Practitioners and University Based Researchers: Challenges and Benefits

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Collaborative Research Between Community Development Practitioners and University Based Researchers: Challenges and Benefits

ABSTRACT

Research collaboration between community development practitioners and university based researchers seeks to make practitioners full partners in the research experience. Such professional-to-professional collaborations can be viewed as a distinct variant of participatory action research. This paper discusses the challenges and benefits of collaborative research between extension agents and researchers, by critically reviewing the collaborative research approach employed in a case study examining the usefulness of social capital in promoting rural landscape sustainability in two counties in the Hudson River Valley in New York State. Such issues as project utility, common language, time, power, focus, and professional politics are analyzed. Collective critical reflection stands as a key element of such research collaboration, and as a longer term benefit to both research and community development practice.

Key Words: participatory action research, social capital, extension, rural landscape

COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH BETWEEN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS AND UNIVERSITY BASED RESEARCHERS: CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

INTRODUCTION

Participatory action research (PAR) has gained attention as a process of action-oriented inquiry that brings together in a collaborative framework the efforts of university-based researchers and those of grassroots collaborators within the community. Joining practitioners, community stakeholders and researchers in a collaborative research effort, participatory action research is designed to result in positive community change. Therefore, an explicit goal is facilitating change in accordance with values of democracy, equity and ecology (Deshler and Ewert, 1995; Hall, 1992; Whyte, 1991; Horton and Freire, 1990).

A recent project examining the process of agricultural land preservation in the suburban fringe of New York City drew on aspects of the participatory action research tradition. University based researchers were intrigued by the work of local cooperative extension agents in organizing and facilitating agriculture preservation efforts. In order to understand the social process and relative successes and failures of these efforts, the researchers asked the extension agents who had been pivotal to participate in a collaborative research project. In their previous work, both the researchers and extension agents had identified the importance of extension-research linkages. Here was an opportunity to strengthen research ties with extension. Extension practice in these New York counties was pushing on the frontiers of theoretical

understanding of community processes - particularly notions of social capital - yet researchers had up to this time directed little analytical attention to this work.

In this paper, we report on this process of research collaboration between extension agents and university-based researchers. We show the push-pull tension, particularly the challenge of breaking through our diverse ways of approaching and discussing things to develop and make creative use of our different perspectives. This type of collaborative research, like that described by Honadle (1996) and Nyden and Wiewel (1992), involves community development practitioners as full research partners. Participatory action research often implies more democratic involvement of a larger segment of the community. Professional-with-professional collaboration is a distinct variant of participatory action research which offers some important insights on the benefits and challenges of greater community-university collaboration in pursuit of community development goals.

CONTEXT: SOCIAL CAPITAL AND LANDSCAPE SUSTAINABILITY IN THE SUBURBAN FRINGE

This research project emerged from an international workshop on new approaches to sustaining rural landscapes in urbanizing regions. The research centered on Dutchess and Orange counties on the suburban fringe of New York City, where preservation efforts have followed different paths. Although half the population in these two counties is urban, both counties have a strong rural character. One third of workers commute outside each county for employment but agriculture remains a leading industry in both counties. These counties were experiencing the highest growth rates in New York in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Housing development was

driving much of the population growth. The rural character of these counties was threatened as exurbanites sought to recreate urban amenities in a less expensive place. Second home owners from New York City (locally known as "weekenders") on the other hand, sought a more rural lifestyle.

Farm-neighbor relations in both Orange and Dutchess counties were becoming an important source of friction. Rising costs and taxes, and the need to develop new value added processes and new ways of marketing posed important challenges for agriculture. Half the open space in these counties was in production agriculture, so Extension saw the potential to build common interests between the production agriculture community, open space advocates and economic developers.

This research developed as a case study to illustrate and assess the usefulness of social capital in promoting rural landscape sustainability. Interest has blossomed recently in the forms of social capital and their consequences for community sustainability (Flora, 1996; Warner et al, 1997). Historically, rural communities of place where people lived, worked and played, created an important overlap of social, political and economic activities. Contemporary rural communities have become less insular and self-contained, with overlapping networks extending way beyond traditional community of place boundaries (Fuller, 1995). This growing disjuncture of the physical and functional challenges a community's sense of itself but also can provide important links to outside visions and resources. To make the most of these links, social capital is critical.

Social capital is defined as those features of social organization - networks, norms of reciprocity and trust- that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. It is a form of capital since it increases the productivity of other resources (Putnam 1993a, 1993b; Bolton 1992; Flora, 1993).

Following from the assumption that high levels of social capital increase the productivity of other community resources, attention has turned to how social capital can be built and enhanced, thereby improving community sustainability.

Our interest in the workings of social capital in agricultural land preservation efforts on the suburban fringe of New York City led us to the work of Cooperative Extension in the Hudson River valley. Because Extension is trusted and supported by both production agriculture and broader community interests, it was well positioned to play a role building social capital within the agricultural community itself and beyond to other communities of interest in the region.

Extension's broad organizational mission, mainstream orientation and collaborative problem solving approach enhance its effectiveness as a facilitator and lessen the threat to agricultural interests as a wider array of interests are brought into the land use debate. The extension agents in Dutchess and Orange counties intimately knew or had participated in activities building social capital to enhance landscape sustainability. Although they were obvious key informants for research about these processes, their role as coauthors brought them into the research process itself.

THE COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

The methodology employed here approaches participatory action research in the sense that community development practitioners were co-researchers with active roles in designing, writing and evaluating the research project. The project recognized the social construction of knowledge and used the biases of the extension agents and researchers to develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the local organizing process. Participatory action research proposes a

more egalitarian and democratic relationship between researcher and community. Research is no longer simply the right of the researcher; it entails obligations to community participants in the process as well (McTaggart, 1991).

The roots of participatory action research lie in both the conflict and the consensus theories of social change. The conflict paradigm argues that conflict is a necessary ingredient for positive social change which must be focused on changing the structural rules of the game. The most notable proponents of this approach are Miles Horton of the Highlander Center in Tennessee, and Paulo Freire in Brazil (Horton and Freire, 1990). The consensus paradigm argues for social change which evolves harmoniously, evolutionary and seeks to increase the efficiency of existing systems through clever use of problem solving techniques. More democratic, participatory, fact-based management approaches (such as Total Quality Improvement) are good examples of this branch of participatory action research and these have gained attention in the education field (Schmoker and Wilson, 1993; Reynolds, 1994). Extension activities fit more comfortably in the consensus approach. By focusing programs on education through facilitation of broader community involvement in collective inquiry and problem solving, productive change results. Examples of this approach are the popular public policy education programs promoted by Cooperative Extension systems in several states (Hahn, 1992).

One tenet of participatory action research is that generation of local knowledge is enhanced by collective reflection. In this project, there was an important tension between the extension agents on the one hand and the researchers on the other - a tension which forced both sides to question and clarify their positions. A beneficial outcome of this tension was the opportunity for critical, collective reflection on theory and practice.

Eldon and Levin (1991) speak of the importance of co-learning in participatory action research. Local participants (here, the extension agents) provide an "insiders' framework," while university-based researchers provide an "outsiders' framework." According to Eldon and Levin, these frameworks need to interact dialogically in order to co-create "local theory." In our case, we sought to generate theory about the construction of social capital in these two counties for agriculture sustainability efforts.

A further outcome of such "insider-outsider" collaboration is that insiders may become more theoretical in their stance and that outsiders may become more sensitive to practical details. This was indeed the case in our extension agent-researcher collaboration. The research-extension dialogue - questioning, documenting and verifying the extension accounts of social capital construction and activation - promoted more theoretical inquiry on the part of the extension agents. The dialogue also forced researchers to address the particularistic aspects of extension experiences which challenged current elaborations of theory. Typically, theory is expected to reflect reality - but the extension partners insisted theory be elaborated to encompass critically important aspects of their practice. This is a key advantage of the dialogical approach.

CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF A COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

The equality between researcher and community development practitioner is a key feature of collaborative research. This equality has definite benefits, but also creates important challenges for the research process. Challenges include differences in goals between community development practitioners and researchers, and the multi-disciplinary nature of community problems versus the often single disciplinary focus of researchers. The tendency of research to

focus on identifying problems rather than solutions as well as the potential for negative results, can make community level collaborators uncertain about the value of getting involved (Nyden and Wiewel, 1992).

There were several challenges to the collaboration which relate directly to the dialogical process Eldon and Levin (1991) discuss. To illustrate the tension and productivity of the dialogue between research and extension partners, the challenges will be presented using representative quotes from field notes during the process and our reflections in jointly writing this article.

a) The first challenge was ensuring the collaboration would be useful to both parties so that both would participate. This project was initiated by university based researchers and subsequently expanded to accommodate broader concerns of the extension collaborators. As a collaboration between two different types of professionals - extension agents and researchers - it needed to meet two different sets of needs.

Because the research was not generated by "the community" broadly understood, it did not include a practice component working towards the goal of social change. The researchers' goals were to identify underlying strategies in innovative extension practice at the suburban fringe and to test the applicability of social capital theory to that work. The extension agents' goals were to have the opportunity for critical reflection on their practice and to enhance their ongoing work. In this case the "community" was limited to professional researchers and extension agents involved in rural landscape sustainability efforts.

Researchers "To be honest, we invited them to be co-authors as a way to reduce the costs of undertaking research on this topic. We sketched

out our research goals and then invited the extension practitioners to join. We knew we needed them. Did we help them decide they also needed us?"

Extension Agents "Why did we agree to participate? The idea of research highlighting our successes, being asked by Cornell colleagues, and the challenge of doing it were compelling reasons. We ended up getting a lot out of it, being able to look critically at our work and gain new insights."

b) The next challenge was language. Researchers are trained in particular disciplines and socialized to particular jargons and mind sets. Extension agents also are socialized to a system with a particular perspective and jargon. These aspects of professional specialization make communication more difficult and particularly critical for successful collaborative research. Experiments with multi-disciplinary farming systems research teams in the 1970s emphasized both the importance and difficulty of communication across disciplinary and research/practitioner lines (Chambers, et al 1989). Our first task was to develop a common theoretical base. Although the extension practice had been singled out as an innovative reflection of social capital theory, the agents, at first, did not find social capital theory compelling.

Researchers "We shared background papers on social capital and a few telephone conference calls to gain an orientation to their work and discuss the potential relevance of social capital theory. The agents did not find the social capital background reading to be easily penetrable and did not initially see strong connections to their work. Although Cornelia Flora is conscious in her appropriation of the economic notion of capital to help lay people understand the importance of social capital, it is not a

concept which lends itself to easy, succinct definition or measurement. We had our own concerns about the concept of social capital but still were frustrated by the agents' reluctance to buy into our theoretical construct."

Extension Agents "Are you kidding? We shared the background paper with colleagues in our office, but no one understood it. We didn't understand it either. In order for us to participate, the researchers would have to rework the academic jargon. Now, we actually use some of these concepts to describe our work."

The problem of language was not limited to the theoretical debate. Our research approach was one of critical, collective reflection - engaging in dialogue about the extension experience and questioning the relevance and applicability of social capital theory. There was an interesting disjuncture between how extension agents told their stories and how researchers interpreted them. It took time to absorb the stories as well as to speak the same language.

Researchers "We really enjoyed hearing their anecdotes about particular people and events but we also were anxious to get the job done. All the detail they insisted on addressing just made our job harder. It would have been easier to leave it out. In the end, the problem of language turned out to be one of emphasis as they pushed the concept of social capital to address the practical realities of social capital construction in the field."

Extension Agents "Here the researchers were trying to tell us what was important in our stories. If you want it to be our story then you have to let us tell it. The researchers would listen, then write. They would get frustrated when we

insisted on changing different nuances. But this is our work, our communities. We are sensitive to how things are portrayed. However, we were all comfortable in speaking out and being persistent. In the end, all of us pushed beyond our particular difficulties and became more creative in explaining our stories."

c) A third challenge was time. The researchers chose the collaborative approach to save time, but in order to arrive at a successful outcome, it actually required more time. Caught in the midst of day to day practice, extension agents find little time for reflection. The opportunity for a collective process of critical reflection gave all parties a chance to consider and incorporate new perspectives. The written accounts helped clarify the connection to social capital theory and also helped explain some of the differences between extension practice in the two counties.

Extension Agents "We enjoyed the opportunity to analyze our work by talking it through in a group. We hadn't had much time to compare our two experiences in Dutchess and Orange counties and it was interesting to hear the outsider "theoretical" perspective on our work. Sometimes they tried to stretch the connections too far and we had to rein them in. While the researchers were great about rewrites, the whole process was more time consuming than we expected."

Researchers "We felt comfortable taking responsibility for writing up notes from the conversation. We pushed on their stories to make stronger connections to theory and thought, if we've gone too far, they'll catch it and push us back when they review. And review they did! A collaboration which was started to save time

actually started taking more time as they insisted on all this detail which, from our perspective, didn't really matter. At times, we found ourselves wishing we hadn't invited them to be coauthors and had instead approached them as key informants. Then we wouldn't have had to deal with all this troublesome detail."

d) A fourth challenge was focus. The original focus of the research was on environmental concerns at the regional level. Local action and economic development issues were not central research concerns, but it turned out they were critical to extension practice.

Extension Agents "They kept pushing us to talk about our successful regional collaborations. But we couldn't, regional collaborations hadn't worked in our experience. A local focus is the foundation on which our work is based. In our situations, regional change builds from local successes, but the connections may not be so obvious."

Researchers "They weren't willing to take the jump with us and go regional. They kept talking about the importance of local action first and the difficulties of scaling up to regional action. And yet their stories were replete with examples of regional change stimulated by local innovations. It really hit home for us when they said "Only professionals cross the river" indicating that building social capital at the community level doesn't scale up since there is no visible community of place where multiple interests intersect at the regional level. That led us to the concept of bridging ties."

This debate led to a critical insight on use of social capital theory as a guide to community development practice. Although social capital theorists emphasize the importance of vertical as

well as horizontal networks, the concept of bridging ties and how they could be effectively constructed and maintained was not fully elaborated. Bridging ties enable exchange of information, power and vision across networks. Granovetter (1973) first emphasized the importance of bridging ties in his influential article on "the strength of weak ties." Our research found that such bridging ties were essential in developing a common vision across different interests. The nature of these bridging ties determined the potential for interaction within and between communities of interest and of place. The extension collaborators' insistence that important features of their practice be incorporated in the theoretical discussion led us to the importance of these new insights.

Bridging ties also can link community efforts to regional change. The rural landscape cross cuts political and ecological boundaries making it hard to organize at a regional level. Multi-issue regional groups are harder to sustain since regional "community of place" is hard to identify. Therefore, regional efforts are more the purview of paid professionals. Through bridging ties, local ideas become available to other places for replication and retooling, and local experience can be translated into policy change. For example, in Dutchess County a community visioning group became the incubator for new state initiatives in farm land protection. In addition, bridging ties among single issue groups gave access to a broader vision without diluting the strength of a focused agenda and clearly defined constituency more commonly associated with single issue groups.

Another important difference in focus was the perceived primary goal of the extension interventions. The researchers had noticed the innovative environmental work being done by the

extension collaborators, but the extension agents themselves insisted on emphasizing the economic development rationale underlying their program strategies.

Extension Agents "To get our communities to listen to agricultural sustainability issues, we had to address economic viability first. Like it or not, economic development is the major concern of our counties' leaders. The researchers' emphasis on environment for its own sake is important, but not the reality at the grassroots. Besides, if our research focus was to document bringing people of various interests together, how could we leave out the predominant dimension?"

Researchers "They kept talking about the economic development rationale for their work. But we could hear the environmental connections and wanted to bring them to the forefront. They didn't approve of that shift of emphasis."

E) A fifth challenge was political. The potential political costs to extension agents were higher than to researchers because the community processes which were the subject of this review took place in the communities where they lived and worked. As we moved to a more theoretical rewrite of the paper and added a section justifying the extension lens to the analysis, everyone's comfort with the final product increased. Researchers often ensure confidentiality of their subjects in data analysis, but in this case the extension collaborators did not wish to be nor could they remain anonymous. They still needed to distance the specifics from the final product, however. Bringing the theoretical insights to the forefront and reducing case descriptions to an illustrative role solved the political problem and made the piece ultimately more useful.

Extension Agents "Once the researchers demonstrated sensitivity to our positions, we loosened up and shared personal thoughts about our work. But when we speak organizationally we have to be more politically sensitive. Not everything we shared could be printed."

Researchers "The dialogue between all of us yielded some tremendous new insights on the rationale behind their practice - bringing strategy to the surface. When we gave them the first draft they said, "Even though we said it, you can't write that." But we just couldn't leave those points out because they were the key critical new insights. Finally we reached a solution by putting the theoretical implications up front and then using shorter case descriptions to illustrate the points."

One key strategy of Extension was the *intentional* creation of forums for interaction. Putnam argues that social capital can be intentionally created through design and promotion of new forums for interaction and exchange (1993a, 1993b). Our research points to the importance of flexible social forums to develop trust and receptivity among stakeholders with prior histories of distrust. Such forums can create fertile ground for innovation. Whether formal or informal, they must be deliberately created in order to bring together different communities of interest with a stake in the local landscape.

That these forums for interaction need to be created and nurtured is a critical insight undergirding community development strategies used by Extension. While Extension efforts to create new farmers markets might be primarily billed as an effort to promote the economic viability of niche agriculture, they also create a forum of interaction, bringing together agricultural and consumer/residential interests in the community. Agricultural leadership groups in Orange

County not only built leadership skills, but created a forum where farmers could talk across commodity lines in ways they had not done before. These forums of interaction and exchange are key generators of social capital, linking communities of interest. They serve as important incubators of new ideas and help develop more comprehensive community problem solving capacity.

MAKING COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PRODUCTIVE

Differences in language, orientation and power are very important impediments to collaborative research. To make these differences productive, rather than destructive, it was helpful to have two researchers and two extension agents involved jointly in the process. We provided reality testing and a sounding board for each other which probably helped reduce tension within the whole group.

Researchers "The nuance and particularities of extension practice were overwhelming. All we wanted to do was provide an illustration of social capital theory. In the car on the way home from visiting Orange and Dutchess counties, we could talk through our frustrations with the way the dialogue had gone and then get new insights upon reflection. Why weren't they buying into social capital theory? It was helpful to have someone with a similar research perspective to share ideas on why we weren't reaching a common understanding more easily."

Extension Agents "If there hadn't been two of us we probably would not have taken on the challenge. Together, we admitted when we didn't understand what was being talked about or didn't feel comfortable with the theoretical links to

our work. We could discuss our concerns with each other and feel stronger in expressing them. As a result, the theoretical implications of our practice were defined by all of us. We also insisted the language be understandable to a non-academic audience."

Both collaborative and traditional researcher oriented research have important limitations. Maybe it is true that "only professionals cross the river." To have truly equal collaborations between researchers and communities it may help to have the tension of two different kinds of professional, extension agents and researchers, working together.

Extension Agents "We had to keep insisting they really listen to get our story right, or if need be, push the theory a little to accommodate reality. It was great to think we were helping to rework theory to make it applicable to reality."

Researchers "The dialogue was the greatest part of the collaboration and where the richest and often most surprising insights came from. If the extension agents had been less bold and challenging we wouldn't have pushed the concepts of social capital so far as to discover some weaknesses and to stake out new emphases for the theory. We were resistant to their pushing, but they insisted on being true to their practice as they saw it. Would other community participants have caved in and said, 'It's not worth it?'"

CONCLUSION

This project illustrates the value of research/extension collaborations. Although important challenges of perspective, communication, power and divergent professional needs must be

overcome, the benefits of such collaborative research can be dramatic. In this case, we not only demonstrated the relevance of social capital theory to extension practice, we also used insights from practice to further elaborate social capital theory. The dynamic research-extension dialogue, characteristic of the critical, collective inquiry research approach, greatly contributed to the success of this collaborative research effort.

By bringing community development practitioners into collaboration with university based researchers, each gains something of the perspective of the other. Instead of a rigid hierarchical division of intellectual labor, collaborative research offers an opportunity for all collaborators, whatever their institutional base, to become co-learners and co-generators of more useful, multi-dimensional knowledge. Given Cooperative Extension's strong and unique links to the university, such an approach reflects the competitive advantage of the extension system. By involving extension agents and ultimately their communities in the design, implementation and evaluation of research, the value of local knowledge is recognized and incorporated. Such university-extension collaborations also can increase everyone's awareness that local knowledge is not static or monolithic. Effective research collaborations such as we have presented here are more likely to portray the social nuances and variability of different community settings accurately. As a variant in the participatory action research tradition, collaborative research holds considerable promise for deepening our understanding of community processes and creating maps for positive social change.

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